

# When Students Say “No!”

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When you ask a student in your class, on the playground, or in the hallways to do something, most will obey you. However, there are times when you ask a student to comply with school rules or make a request and the student confidently, and without hesitation, responds, “NO.” This is about the time when a minor altercation erupts into a major problem that could result in the student being reprimanded, given detention, or suspended.

How can we deal with children who say “NO?” Better yet, what can we do to prevent the child from being in a situation where he/she has the opportunity to say “NO?”

## **Understand Your Students**

First, you need to know your students and their “triggers.” What words, actions, or phrases seem to put them into a heightened state of anxiety or defensiveness? For example, some children do not respond well to requests early in the morning. Others need to be presented a request in a manner that doesn’t appear to be a request. Remember, communication is 80 percent “how” something is said and 20 percent “what” is said.

In addition to knowing the “trigger,” you need to know the underlying function of child’s behavior. Is the child responding in a negative way to get attention, seek power and control, receive a tangible, or escape/avoid a situation or demand? More than likely, children who respond to commands with a “NO” are trying to gain power or control. They may also be trying to gain a degree of independence.

## **Be Proactive**

As much as possible, use strategies that will keep a potential confrontation from occurring.

### **1. Establish Classroom Rules**

Developing sound classroom rules, posting them, and reviewing them daily will go a long way to

preventing potential problems. Try to write rules WITH your students, so they will begin to take ownership. Write the rules in a positive way. For example, rather than the rule, “No running,” rewrite that statement in a positive way: “Please walk at all times.” It’s human nature to be turned off by a series of rules or regulations in which each statement begins with “NO”.

Also, make your rules specific. “Be prepared for class” does not communicate your students your expectations. Rather, the rule, “Come to class with your pencil, pen, books, and paper leaves no doubt as to what you expect.

One final note on rules and procedures. Keep your rules to a maximum of five, and make sure they are observable and measurable.

### **2. Promote Smooth Transitions**

Often students will respond negatively to your commands when they feel pressured to move from one activity to another without sufficient forewarning. Some students will need more preparation than others. Get to them first and begin to move them along so you don’t reach a point that becomes confrontational. Also, cue, or signal, students that an activity is coming to an end. And, use close proximity to encourage students to follow your commands rather than putting them on the spot in front of their peers.

### **3. Know the Function of the Student’s Behavior**

It is extremely important that you determine the underlying cause or goal of a student’s behavior. We can be effective with an appropriate intervention only when we recognize the purpose the student’s behavior serves. For example, if a student responds to your command with a “NO,” is he or she looking for attention? You may respond by keeping the child in for lunch or recess. On the surface, your actions may appear to be a punishment for the student; however, the child enjoys what he or she perceives as some time alone with you.

Is the student trying to escape a situation or demand? You may escalate a situation or demand? You may escalate a situation to the point where you send the child to the office. Once again, you view this as a punishment. On the other hand, this seventh grade boy, who is a poor reader, just escaped the humiliating experience of reading orally in your class.

Finally, is the child responding in a negative way to gain power or control? You may win this confrontational “battle” because you move the child to time-out, send him or her to the office, or assign detention. However, you have lost the “war,” because every student now knows what buttons to push to get you into such a state.

### **Responding to “NO”**

There are several strategies a teacher can use to deal with students who say, “NO.” Keep in mind, these strategies should be used with other proactive interventions.

#### **1. Refrain from Escalating a Minor Incident**

Often we as teachers share responsibility for escalating a minor incident into a major problem. To reduce the risk of escalating a situation with a student try to deal in the present. Stay away from reminding the student of past failures and problems.

Talk directly to the student rather than about the student. Be sure to make eye contact, but don’t force your students to “look at you when you are speaking.” Unless they are hard of hearing, they can hear you. It is humiliating for any of us to look our accusers in the eye when we know we are wrong.

Finally, make statements rather than ask questions. Teachers have a habit of asking the wrong question in a tense situation (How many times do I have to tell you to stop talking?) and getting an unexpected answer from a student (“Tell me 10 more time and I will stop”).

#### **2. Give Choices Whenever Possible**

If the circumstance permits, allow your students

to have a choice in their daily routines and activities. If a student believes they have some choice in a situation, they feel more independent and may be less likely to confront you with a “NO”. For example, if you want students to complete a math and social studies assignment before recess, why not let them choose which assignment they will do first?

Assessing student knowledge also gives you an opportunity to give them a choice. For example, some students may opt for a written test, while others want to create a project. By incorporating student’s interest into our daily routines, we give them opportunities to exert some independence and reduce their need to seek power and control by negative means.

#### **3. Remove the Student**

This is easier said than done. Invent creative ways to remove the student from the current situation without you or the student “losing face.” It may mean you will have to redirect him or her by sending the child on an errand. You need to plan for these situations. You will not be successful if you try to think on your feet when you have locked horns with a student in front of 28 peers.

#### **4. Remove the Audience**

Sometimes it is not advisable to remove a student from your classroom. You may have to look for ways to remove the other students. This can be done within the room (e.g., direct your students’ attention to a different part of the room: blackboard, overhead) or outside the room (having students stand in the hallway). While the audience is removed, attempt to de-escalate the situation and come to a temporary solution.

With these last two strategies, it is imperative that you keep other options available, including involving the administration. You need to have planned in advance how to deal with a student who will not remove himself or herself from the room. Don’t put yourself or your students in danger.

## **5. Agree with the Student**

The next time a student responds "NO" and tells you that "you can't make me do it," simply agree with him or her. It is very difficult to argue with someone when they agree with you. By remaining calm and businesslike, you have removed the bait and left the student fishing for another. Understand that the student will likely want to continue to argue. State to the student what you expect, no more. For example, I expect you to do problems one through 10 and turn them in at the end of class. Remove yourself and allow some space. If the child refuses to comply, restate your demand with a consequence. "You can sit quietly and do problems one through 10, or you will lose recess." Another consequence for students who continue to act out may be to send them to time out or the office.

Be careful here. Again, it's important that you know the underlying function of the student's behavior. Is the child saying "NO" to gain power/control, or is he or she looking to be removed from the room (escape/avoid)? If he or she is trying to escape or avoid, that situation/demand may indicate the child is experiencing difficulty with the assignment.

## **6. Contact Parents ASAP**

It's very important to keep an open line of communication with your student's families.

Equally important is to communicate on a consistent basis when your students are exhibiting appropriate behaviors. By doing this, you will be more likely to have parental cooperation when a student engages in inappropriate behavior.

Make parental contact on the first offense. Do not let the misbehavior go to a second offense without discussing it with your student's parents.

Inevitably you will encounter students who, when you make a request or demand, will respond with "NO." Be proactive in anticipating these situations and what may trigger them for certain students. Become skilled at identifying the goal or function of a child's misbehavior and develop strategies to address his or her needs. Don't allow your actions to escalate a minor incident into a major problem.

As the teacher and authority figure in the classroom, know your limits of power. You can't make kids do or think anything they don't want to. Establish a positive classroom environment and provide your students with choices to help them.